

# Networked Journalism: What Works

Lessons from Nine Collaborative  
Journalism Pilot Projects

By Jan Schaffer  
J-Lab Executive Director



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## Networked Journalism: What Works

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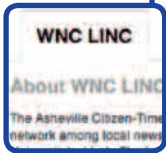
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## Networked Journalism: What Works

By Jan Schaffer

Three years ago, J-Lab launched the first round of what would turn out to be nine pilot projects in collaborative journalism in the United States. Now, the verdicts – and the lessons learned – are in.

There is good news and bad news. A majority of the projects delivered success far beyond our expectations and a notable level of creativity; others did yeoman’s work. And, unfortunately, a couple projects failed.

The various models for building the collaborations were astonishingly different. The epiphanies for many of the newsrooms at the hub of the activities were, in their own words, transformational.

*Partners come and they go. Some divorce the network, some die in an emerging news ecosystem that is still quite fragile.*

**The overall score:** Five wins, two hits and two losses.

**Two key takeaways:** Content sharing overall can be a win-win for both legacy newsrooms and indie start-ups. Revenue sharing, however, is still a nut to be cracked.

Many of the participating newsrooms have integrated partner contributions into their daily news flow. One site, The Seattle Times, has even created a weekly Sunday print page that highlights best partner stories of the previous week. Participating indie news partners requested, and received, substantial training in business, multimedia skills and journalism. Entire websites, such as North Coast Oregon<sup>1</sup> and Villa Heights Voice<sup>2</sup> in Charlotte, were created for communities that had no news coverage.



“I was enthusiastic about this, but I had no idea of how transformative this would be for us,” said David Shribman, editor of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, which launched the Pipeline site to cover fracking. “It changed the center of gravity for our whole organization.”

Said Seattle Times Editor David Boardman, “I think this program . . . has been hugely, hugely paradigm-changing for our newsroom and for me, individually.”

Bottom line: At its height, the nine hub newsrooms had grown their networks from 44 partners to 169; 146 partners are still participating.

We’ve learned, however, that all networks are iterative: Partners come and they go. Some divorce the network, some die in an emerging news ecosystem that is still quite fragile. Indeed, only two of the projects still have the identical partners they launched with.



Traditional newsrooms got to share with their audiences stories of their communities that they no longer could cover on their own. Hyperlocal news sites got a megaphone

*The Seattle Times now produces a Sunday page with stories from its partner network.*



for news that had been stuck in local silos. And news consumers were given some new ways to navigate their noisy local blogosphere.

With this report, we tell the stories of the individual projects and examine efforts to share content and monetize regional hyperlocal networks with advertising. The stories are drawn on interviews, project reports, presentations and correspondence – all with an eye to the lessons that can be learned.

These stories also offer early insights into some issues surfacing in the emerging news landscape: the “problem of news” to be solved, the rise of advocacy news sites, the tenuous nature of indie start-ups, the reality of sponsored content and the bandwidth available for innovation in legacy newsrooms.

The Networked Journalism (Net-J) project was funded with \$500,000 from the Knight Foundation,<sup>3</sup> and the foundation is to be credited for also supporting a second round of pilot projects.

### Here’s How It Worked

In the Networked Journalism experiment, eight legacy newspapers and one public radio station were invited to partner with at least five independent news efforts in their community for at least a year. The first five pilot projects were extended with a small amount of additional funding for another year, in large part to see if they could monetize their network. In a second round, four more pilot sites were added.



Left to design their own models, nine different approaches emerged, including two networks that focused on topics – fracking for natural gas and sports – rather than geography.

All but two of the participating legacy newsrooms had to overcome a fundamental, but overarching, tension: Could they really bring themselves to drive traffic off their own websites to stories appearing on other news sites in their community?

“This whole notion that we would feature someone else’s content on our website and drive traffic off the site, that was such an alien notion at the time we took the leap on this,” Seattle’s Boardman said.

Jennifer Rothacker, The Charlotte Observer’s Innovations Editor, agreed. “There was a mind block in the newsroom to put headlines on charlotteobserver.com<sup>4</sup> that would link to other sites. It took a long time for people to get their heads around that.”



One site, The Miami Herald,<sup>5</sup> avoided this by creating “channels” for participating partners on its own content management system. Another, the Lawrence Journal-World in Kansas, launched a whole content network to try to syndicate participants’ stories.



There were tensions as well for the independent news start-ups: As fledgling enterprises, how could they maintain their independence and participate without being big-footed by a major news organization in town? How much content could they share without hurting their own enterprises? Would they get enough traffic to make it worthwhile? Would an affiliation with a big-media partner in town undercut the very independence that many of their constituents love?

“My neighborhood thinks The Seattle Times has a more conservative, more suburban view of the city. My people don’t like that,” said Justin Cardin, founder of Capitol Hill Seattle Blog,<sup>6</sup> a partner.



First-year projects received \$45,000 each with \$20,000 targeted to pay for a coordinator to help recruit and oversee the network, plus five \$5,000 “thank-you” stipends to be awarded to the initial five participants. An additional \$15,000 was awarded the following year to help focus on bringing in revenue.

In the second round, projects were awarded \$50,000 each to pay for a coordinator and provide training, and the individual sites were given leeway to determine the amount of partner stipends. Most of the second-year projects paid their partners less than \$5,000 apiece.

The size of the partner stipend, however, did not correlate to the success of the project, although some networks lost momentum when the funding ran out. “Without even a little carrot of grant money, it was a hard sell,” said Anthony Gimino, project coordinator for Tucson’s Sports Network.

Angie Newsome, The Asheville Citizen-Times’ project manager, said the stipends “went a long way in building trust in the community and countering claims that the newspaper simply wanted content for free.”

Funding a part-time project coordinator, however, turned out to be a critical component for the high-touch activi-

ties needed to get the networks off the ground, and getting the right coordinator could make or break a project. Three of the original coordinators have since been hired full time by their newsrooms.

J-Lab issued the invitations based on prospects for partner candidates in the community and for leadership stability in the hub newsrooms. The Gannett Co. recommended two of its news outlets as partners, TucsonCitizen.com and The Asheville Citizen-Times.

Five of the partners are still going strong. Two had very strong starts and made it to second base, but by the third year are greatly diminished. Two are inactive.

Success stories include The Seattle Times, The Charlotte Observer, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, The Oregonian in Portland and KQED Public Radio in San Francisco. The Miami Herald and TucsonCitizen.com launched bold and promising networks, but only a handful of partners remain active. The Asheville Citizen-Times and Lawrence Journal-World got off to strong starts but didn’t make a go of it.

### The Problem to be Solved

With U.S. newspapers losing more than 42,000 journalists since 2007, local news coverage has suffered. At the same time, hundreds of local blogs and news sites have launched in their markets. Some are covering neighborhoods or small towns; others are doing state-wide accountability journalism. Still more are covering lifestyle topics such as the arts, food or the outdoors.

What role can traditional news organizations play, not only to expose their audiences to more news than they themselves can deliver, but also to connect new sources of information rising throughout their communities?

For Oregonian Editor Peter Bhatia it is aiming for a “big-tent” that makes the paper’s website “a central place for local news – however you define it.” The Oregonian News Network<sup>7</sup> now has 48 partners. “We believe journalism can and should include a much broader range of coverage,” he said. “And we don’t neces-



**Success stories:** The Seattle Times, The Charlotte Observer, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, The Oregonian in Portland and KQED Public Radio in San Francisco.



sarily think only our journalists can do that work.”

Some traditional news organizations think that no indie news sites in their communities are good enough to partner with. They fear they will dilute their brand if they associate with content providers who are not professional journalists.

But increasingly, news organizations are noticing that some of the new players are doing a pretty good job. “I believe these emerging news organizations are performing a valuable news service, reporting news I don’t see elsewhere, or reporting more deeply than our general-interest newspapers,” said Bruce Koon, news director of KQED Public Radio,<sup>8</sup> which is now working with eight “news associates.”

The newsrooms that agreed to pilot these projects had different goals. Some wanted to juice content from bootstrapped websites for their beleaguered newspaper. Others wanted to validate and send traffic to indie news sites that might help monetize a network. The Oregonian wanted to create a “dynamic publishing and educational network.”

## Secret Sauce for Success

What would a successful partnership look like? For Seattle, now with 54 partners,<sup>9</sup> it was a loose confederation that would share tips and links, but not full stories, and abide by a one-page Memorandum of Understanding. For Charlotte, now with 18 partners, it was an iron-clad content licensing agreement that allowed partners to republish up to four full stories or photos a week. (Find copies of available partnership agreements at [www.j-lab.org/projects/net-j/docs](http://www.j-lab.org/projects/net-j/docs).)

To address quality and brand, many of the networks came up with content guidelines that urged daily updating, codified protocols for attribution and linking, prohibited copying of photos without permission, and barred creating stories in exchange for advertising sales.

Integral to success were the kinds of partners recruited to be in the network. Creators of original content were key. Quality and frequency of posts were important. Sites that were too local or too niche might not have enough appropriate content that other sites would want to share with their readers.



Training also helped gel the networks, allowing partners to learn from others and feel like they were almost part of a club. Partners got training in how to sell ads, how to do video and audio, how to use social media, how to do deep search – and more. Training however, could be challenging. It was often hard to convene partners who might be working other jobs during the day and covering community meetings at night.

To date, these pilot projects demonstrated that to design a genuine win-win for both a legacy newsroom and its community partners, two things are needed:

- It is the responsibility of the hub news organization to provide their news networks with enough visibility and outbound links to drive traffic to their partners’ sites.
- It is the responsibility of the community news partners to post frequently enough to be robust participants and to nab the visibility – either on the network page or the home page – that would bring them traffic.

While there was no marketing or promotion money for these projects, many, in particular Pittsburgh’s Pipeline<sup>10</sup> project, used social media. Some like The Oregonian developed a network logo and ran house ads featuring some of its partners. Others such as KQED put their partners on the air.



## Generating Revenue

There were four different attempts to generate revenue among the pilot projects. The most organized involved a Seattle Times partnership with KING5 television to use their combined sales forces to develop an ad network for hyperlocal partners and split revenue. Within a year, they concluded they could not cover their costs. The Miami Herald actually created advertising spots on partner channels in its content management system that the partners could sell and keep the revenue. Few ads, however, were sold. The Lawrence Journal-World developed a new content network to sell stories and, it

## Ten Key Recommendations

- 1 **Designate a champion.** A news network needs some resources and support from the top.
- 2 **Hire a coordinator.** A designated person needs to be in charge of recruiting partners, troubleshooting issues and collecting metrics.
- 3 **Simplify paperwork.** Partners shouldn't need to hire a lawyer to sign a partnership agreement.
- 4 **Codify your expectations and aspirations.** It levels the playing field and gives grounds to toss out those who don't play by the rules.
- 5 **Link but don't lift.** Driving traffic to original content enables more of it to be produced.
- 6 **Build the relationships and content ramps first.** Then use those as springboards for revenue opportunities.
- 7 **Invite iteration.** Creating new web pages to improve visibility or automating processes for posting links drive impact and efficiency.
- 8 **Build skills and share knowledge.** Partners want to do their jobs better, and readers want quality news and information.
- 9 **Prepare for scrutiny.** News outlets not in the network will take note of any missteps.
- 10 **Broadcast your efforts.** The community welcomes knowing what's happening.

hoped, ads, but it never took off. Tucson Citizen thought it could monetize a sports network, but it couldn't attract the corporate support it needed.

It is likely that regional news networks need to become more mature and stable to attract advertising or sponsorship support. A J-Lab/Seattle Times survey of reader perceptions of Seattle's network (see sidebar page 8) offers intriguing signs that local news networks create enough community awareness that an advertiser could get a brand bump by championing them.

### Conclusion

The reality is, it takes resources to build and maintain a news network and gather enough metrics to inform advertisers or sponsors. And it takes news leaders to dedicate the resources that will keep it together and involve the newsroom in the enterprise. From vetting and meeting with partners to getting contracts signed, from posting content to following up with absentee

partners, from working with an accounting department to paying stipends or sharing advertising revenue, the initiatives are a challenge. "Launching The World Co.'s Networked Journalism project proved to be a bigger undertaking than we expected," said project leader Jonathan Kealing.

Increasingly, however, recruiting news partners is becoming not only a competitive strategy but also an investment in disrupting the conventional order of things and repositioning traditional news organizations for the future.

If a community can build a vibrant news ecosystem with relationships that trickle down through social media and link sharing, said Oregonian News Network project leader Cornelius Swart, "you might engage with a new generation of news consumers you might not otherwise reach through web search, the legacy news organization or traditional marketing." ■

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.northcoastoregon.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://villaheightsvoice.com/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.knightfoundation.org/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/charlotte-newsnetwork/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/community-news/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.capitolhillseattle.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.kqed.org/news/bayarea/partner-about.jsp>

<sup>9</sup> <http://seattletimes.com/flatpages/local/newspartners/newspartnernetwork.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://pipeline.post-gazette.com/>



*"This has been hugely, hugely paradigm-changing for our newsroom, and for me individually . . . This whole notion that we would feature someone else's content on our website and drive traffic off the site, that was such an alien notion at the time we took the leap on this."*

– David Boardman | Executive Editor, The Seattle Times

# Seattle News Partner Network

## Growing in a Competitive News Ecosystem

The idea of trying to connect with local blogs was already on The Seattle Times' radar when the Net-J funding came along and kickstarted the effort into high gear. It has stayed in high gear for more than three years.

It is the only Net-J project that actually developed a print product based on partner content. In April 2012, The Times launched a page in its Sunday paper that reported – in USAToday state round-up fashion – capsules of the week's top stories from members of its News Partner Network,<sup>1</sup> with Times' copy editors writing the summaries.

Another hallmark: Seattle was the only Net-J site that made a full-blown effort to develop a regional advertising network with its partners.

But, first, it built the news network. Starting with five, it has grown<sup>2</sup> to

54 partners, including 35 news sites, 17 lifestyle blogs and 2 ethnic news outlets.

Recruiting indie news partners in Seattle was no small feat. In no other metro area in the country is the news ecosystem as sophisticated and as competitive as Seattle's, which has scores of neighborhood and topic sites. Here, collaboration is the new competition. "It's brutal," said editor David Boardman.

Three other legacy media players were building their own news partner networks: KOMO-TV<sup>3</sup> has been working on an \$11 million initiative to develop community news sites for more than 40 neighborhoods and aggregate news from other bloggers with ads sold by Datasphere. Seattlepi.com,<sup>4</sup> the digital successor to the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, has recruited its own corps of partners, who generally contribute full stories. AOL's Patch has a network of some 20 community news sites in the suburbs.

"Our approach to this can be summed up by the adage: If you can't beat them, join them," said Bob Payne, The Times' editor of partnerships and audience engagement, who has spearheaded the network from the beginning with the help of a part-time coordinator, Nina Pardo.

Motivating The Times, in part, was the observation that quality was improving at many of the city's neighborhood blogs even as the newspaper's neighborhood coverage was declining, Payne said.

"We at least had the insight to see that the blogosphere was emerging here organically and was both healthy and impressive," Boardman said. "We felt a little bit threatened by it."



Boardman said he saw three choices: The Times could try to compete head-on. It could “co-opt” the emerging sites by getting them to provide content. Or it could “embrace them, and that’s what we tried,” Boardman said.

Goals for the bloggers were a bit different than for The Times. “Their No. 1 interest was figuring out how we could help them generate more revenue,” Payne said. “While ours was in making the news site more complete.”

## The Launch

The Net-J project was announced<sup>5</sup> on Aug. 17, 2009. Within a month, The Times had recruited its first five partners, all with substantial track records. They were West Seattle Blog,<sup>6</sup> a successful hyperlocal site launched by journalist Tracy Record; My Ballard,<sup>7</sup> launched by MSNBC exec Cory Bergman and his wife Kate as part of their Next Door Media network of sites; Rainier Valley Post,<sup>8</sup> operated by Amber Campbell to cover a mostly



## News Partnership: A Brand Boost for The Times

**W**ith no marketing resources available for the Seattle News Partner Network, were news consumers even aware that The Seattle Times was collaborating with local websites?

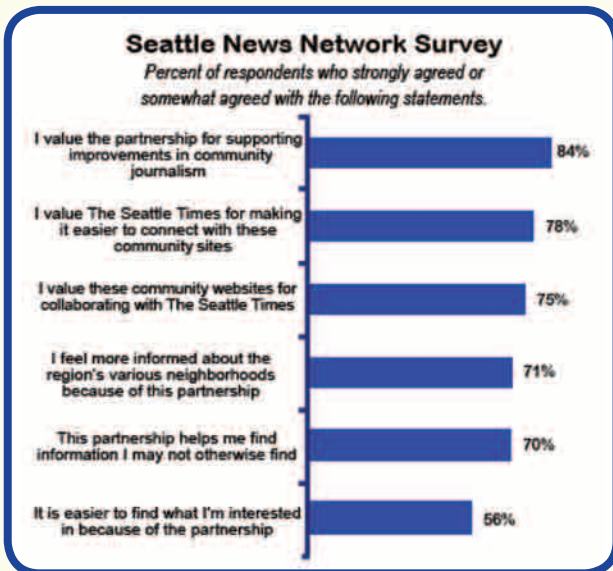
In early 2011, J-Lab worked with the newspaper to develop an online survey to gauge reader perception of the effort.

The results, reported in April 2011, surprised both The Times and J-Lab; 996 people responded. Eight in 10 said they valued both the network of partners and The Times itself for making it easier to connect with community news.

More than half (51%) of the respondents said they knew about the partnership before taking the survey. Respondents who reached the survey via partner sites were more aware of the partnership (61%) than those from seattletimes.com. Another 77% said they would take advantage of the partnership in the future.

“I don’t think journalists recognize there is some PR value to readers to respecting independent coverage in your ecosystem,” said Bob Payne, the network’s project leader.

The online survey was conducted over two weeks in March 2011, at a point when the network had grown from five sites to 39. It sought to determine not only whether people were aware of the partnership but also whether it was meeting their information needs. The respondents comprised a voluntary sample, with roughly half accessing the survey from seattletimes.com’s home page and half accessing it via links on five participating partner sites.



minority area; Capitol Hill Seattle,<sup>9</sup> founded by Justin Carder to cover the Capitol Hill neighborhood; and Seattle Local Health Guide,<sup>10</sup> operated by a medical doctor, Michael McCarthy.

In addition to longevity, The Times sought sites that had built strong interactions with their readers, supported such basic journalism standards as fairness and source verification and were respected by their peers. Indeed, when The Times announced the partners, the blogging community reacted positively; commenters “saw it as a recognition of their hard work,” Payne said.

Here was the deal: The partners would get links to their stories on the News Partners landing<sup>11</sup> page and the opportunity for their headlines to appear on the



seattletimes.com home page. They could also ask to use Times photos. The Times promised to publish only links to partner stories to help drive traffic back to their site. The Times also said it would never partner with sites that were direct competitors with any of its partners. In return, The Times asked for responsible content and to be given the first heads up on breaking news.

On seattletimes.com, the partnership means presenting headlines and incorporating links from partner sites. More than half the respondents (54%) said they used links from The Times to go to partner sites. Others accessed The Times’ site from the individual community sites.

Although The Times was driving traffic to its partner sites, it also appeared to get the greatest benefit from the collaboration:

- More than half the respondents (52%) said the partnership improved their opinion of seattletimes.com strongly or somewhat.
- 84% said they valued the partnership for supporting improvements in community journalism.
- 78% said they valued The Times for making it easier to connect with community news sites.

“It bolsters our brand, even if we are not seeing a direct traffic gain,” said The Times’ Deputy Managing Editor Heidi de Laubenfels at the time.

A majority of the respondents (79%) said they would be willing to support the network as readers; some said they would donate, advertise or sponsor an activity.

Partners that participated in the survey were the West Seattle Blog, Capitol Hill Seattle, My Edmonds News, My Ballard and Three Sheets Northwest.

Breaking news is the most commonly sought community news topic. Next were “go-do” types of information about local events and activities. Events and activities are more popular on the partner sites, however, than on seattletimes.com.

More than 324 of the 996 respondents wrote in their impressions of the partnership in free-form text boxes. Positive comments outweighed negatives by more than 10 to one.

Readers with positive feedback said they liked the cooperation among the sites and thought it benefited them as readers. Negative commenters complained that the partner sites were giving up their independence to The Times or that the newspaper was giving credence to news not always produced by professional journalists.

Many of the open-ended comments urged The Times to make some changes. Among them:

- Expand the network geographically.
- Provide more partner headlines on its home page.
- Make it very clear when a link takes them off seattletimes.com website.

The comments also indicated that the respondents were very happy with their neighborhood sites and often use them as a primary source of news.

What emerged was a loose confederation with a one-page Memorandum of Understanding that set out some expectations and a Code of Ethics. Nothing needed to be signed. Payne said all he needed was an email saying, “We can live with that.”

“It’s so low-key it’s easy to forget sometimes that it’s really a thing,” said West Seattle Blog’s Tracy Record.

The Times itself was competitive; it would not partner with blogs that were publishing full stories on seattlepi.com. “I can’t see linking, or touting, or sharing story tips with our prime competitor. So we didn’t partner with them,” said Payne, although he says there are some [blogs] he’d like to have in The Times’ network.



*The Seattle Times highlights key partner headlines in a box on the home page.*

Initially, Payne and Pardo were manually moderating all partner RSS feeds and posting five headlines twice a day into a Community News Partner box on the home page. Eventually, they developed a way to customize the feed they wanted to ingest into The Times’ content management system and onto the partner page.

In addition to sharing headlines, the News Partner Network also delivered some journalism firsts: In two instances, partners planned synchronized, enterprise coverage of two regional issues — graffiti and homelessness. The Aug. 3, 2011 report on homelessness,<sup>12</sup> for example, involved seven sites, 10

stories, six videos and 75 photos. The Times launched a three-day series with a Sunday takeout that featured key stories and a photo essay.

*...the biggest traffic increases derive from home-page links rather than partner-page links. “You’re either in the box or not in the box. If you’re in the box, you get a lot of traffic.”*

— Matt Rosenberg | Founder, Public Data Ferret

The May 2010 graffiti project took a first-place award in Online Innovation at the SPJ NW Excellence in Journalism contest. The News Partner Network won the 2010 APME Innovator of the Year award.

By fall of 2012, The Times was sending well over 100,000 referrals a month to its partner sites, Payne said.

Tracy Record welcomes the traffic bump and says the partnership also brings some cachet: “I can tell people: ‘Just so you know, this was on The Seattle Times’ home page.”

She credits The Times with respecting the partners’ autonomy, and making efforts to link to and credit partner content. “I’ve been consulted even though there’s no monetary or contractual relationship. I really appreciate that.”

Matt Rosenberg, founder of partner Public Data Ferret<sup>13</sup> said the biggest traffic increases derive from home-page links rather than partner-page links. “You’re either in the box or not in the box,” he said. “If you’re in the box, you get a lot of traffic.”

One downside to that traffic, though, says Carder, of Capitol Hill Seattle, is that it “introduces a lot of trolls” and he has to go in and clean up their comments.



## Attempting an Ad Network

While the content part of the project has been deemed “a solid success,” Payne said the revenue part failed.

For the advertising sales people at The Times, the project was always a headscratcher that might pull in, at best, digital pennies instead of dollars.

In late 2010, The Times and KING5-TV<sup>14</sup> announced the launch of beLocal. The idea was to use the digital-advertising sales forces from both organizations to sell advertising into a local ad network consisting of local blogs and other niche online publications.

“It was hoped that the Belo Corp. station and the newspaper, with the two largest local ad sales staffs in the market, would be able to at least cover the costs of the ad-serving platform that the companies had licensed to handle the ad-serving technology,” said Mark Briggs, KING’s director of digital media. “Unfortunately that did not happen.”

“If we already had the platform and didn’t have to pay extra for it every month, we could have made it work,” Briggs said. “The slices of the pie were just too small when you start with a vendor then split between [KING] and the Times and then share with the local blogger/publisher.”

The beLocal initiative ended on Nov. 5, 2011 with a memo from Alan Fisco, The Times’ executive vice president of revenue and new products. “Over the past nine months we have not seen the marketplace embrace the beLocal product to the degree necessary to sustain the product,” he said.

Justin Carder wasn’t surprised. Ad people never showed up at partner meetings, he said. He tells the story of the scorpion hitching a ride across the river on the back of a

frog. “Both were the scorpions,” he said. “The Times and KING had no intention of carrying one another to the other side.”

By early 2012, The Times began developing some new workflows that involved “pushing evolution out into the newsroom,” Payne said. This was needed, in part, because coordinator Nina Pardo left The Times.

Now the newsroom has the responsibility for selecting the five partner headlines that go on the home page. “Our whole philosophy: If our editors and reporters are shaping the news, shouldn’t they be the ones who see the RSS feeds?” said Payne.

Newsrooms are driven by revenue imperatives these days and Payne knows he has to champion the project as “something we have to do for our future.”

Still, said Boardman, “The impact of this project opened our minds in a variety of ways in what we do and how we do them.”

“I do feel compelled to say, I think this program – and I’m not blowing smoke at you – has been hugely, hugely paradigm-changing for our newsroom and for me, individually.”

“This whole notion that we would feature someone else’s content on our website and drive traffic off the site, that was such an alien notion at the time we took the leap on this, and drive traffic to their websites and trust other people to get it right and not hurt our brand. We’ve never done it in such a visible way as this,” he said.

“And the fact that we accepted the money – we had an obligation to do this right and kept it a priority amid cost cutting because we had an obligation.” ■

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://seattletimes.com/flatpages/local/newspartners/localnewssites.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://seattletimes.com/flatpages/local/newspartners/newspartnernetwork.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.komonews.comunities/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.seattlepi.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.j-lab.org/about/press-releases/five-news-organizations-join-networked-journalism-project/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://westseattleblog.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ballard.com>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.rainiervalleypost.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.capitolhillseattle.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://mylocalhealthguide.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://seattletimes.com/flatpages/local/newspartners/localnewssites.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://seattletimes.com/flatpages/local/invisiblefamilies.html>

<sup>13</sup> <http://socialcapitalreview.org/public-data-ferret/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.king5.com/>

*"There was a mind block in the newsroom to put headlines on charlotteobserver.com that would link to other sites. It took a long time for people to get their heads around that."*

— Jennifer Rothacker | Innovations Editor, Charlotte Observer

## Charlotte News Alliance

### Republishing Partner Content

When The Charlotte Observer reached out for partners to join a Networked Journalism project, it didn't have to look very far. Two former Observer journalists had launched two of the most robust, local-news start-ups.

QCityMetro.com<sup>1</sup> was started by the paper's former deputy managing editor, Glenn Burkins, to cover the Queen City's African-American community. Burkins has deep reporting chops from stints as a foreign correspondent and a reporter for the Wall Street Journal and Philadelphia Inquirer. Former Observer reporter David Boraks founded DavidsonNews.net<sup>2</sup> to cover the nearby college town of Davidson, N.C.

They could be trusted to produce good journalism and that was important. For, in no uncertain terms, The

Observer was looking for free or cheap content for its print editions. While most other Net-J partners shared links, The Observer was unique among Net-J partners in the structure and limits it placed around sharing full articles.

"The Observer wanted quality content to supplement our print and online news. Our partners sought training and The Observer's seal of approval," Alicia Roberts, the original project coordinator, said in 2010. Roberts, a former metro editor for The State in Columbia, S.C., and Steve Gunn, then The Observer's editor for new products and innovations, launched the project with high-touch communications between partners, a training agenda, and lots of shared reports of who picked up whose stories.

At first, there was no home-page presence and little visibility for the network. The partners got credit for any of their stories that appeared in the newspaper or on its website, and they could republish up to four partner stories or photos a week (including Observer stories) on their own websites. But they got little additional web traffic from participating in the project.

By early 2011, the Charlotte Hyperlocal Group was re-branded the "Charlotte News Alliance" and finally got some sharp real estate on charlotteobserver.com<sup>3</sup> that did drive traffic to partners. The alliance also suffered one divorce.

Davidson News' Boraks refused to re-up when presented with a new content agreement that allowed The Observer to continue using four of his stories or photos a week.



“The way it was working, the partners were providing free content to them,” Boraks said in a February 2011 interview. “I don’t need Observer press credentials. I don’t need to brand myself as some sub-set of The Observer.”

“Losing DavidsonNews.net was a loss,” said Jennifer Rothacker, the paper’s Innovations Editor, who took over the partnership in early 2011 after the funding for Alicia Roberts was spent. “Boraks is very successful. He saw no benefit – I get it – to partnering with us.”

“But once the paper got the online component straightened out, I think Boraks would have gotten a lot of benefit,” she said later.

Indeed, Boraks went on to launch a sister site, CorneliusNews.net,<sup>4</sup> in a larger town nearby, and he has aspirations for more sites in other towns, including some that are the focus of The Observer’s weekly Neighbors section.

In addition to chafing at providing free content to a much larger news outlet, Boraks said he wasn’t registering much traffic to his site from The Observer.

Such outbound links initially were a high hurdle for the newspaper to overcome. “There was a mind block in the newsroom to put headlines on charlotteobserver.com that would link to other sites. It took a long time for people to get their heads around that,” Rothacker said. “Now people have accepted that it’s OK.”

Rothacker brought some new energy to the project when she took it on at the beginning of 2011. There are now about 18 partners still posting. Importantly, she also wrangled sizable real estate<sup>5</sup> at the bottom of the newspaper’s home page that includes a photo and five story links to partner stories.

“I made it clear that this had to happen for them,” she said. “Partners generally get a 10 percent bump in traffic when they have a headline [on the home page] and record numbers when they get a photo.”

She also added links to news produced by The Observer’s own community news outlets, which weren’t getting much online traffic.

Having the alliance on the home page as a brand made the partners “feel they are part of the group instead of us just using their content,” Rothacker said.



The partners page (top) and home page (bottom) for the News Alliance.

She also recruited some larger partners for the alliance, including WFAE 90.7 public radio and WCNC.com, the city’s NBC affiliate.

“My philosophy was: Let’s go for established names that can really add some heft for us so when people see the network, there are a lot of newsmakers there.”

A portal page<sup>6</sup> on charlotteobserver.com has RSS feeds of news stories from all the alliance’s partners and community weeklies.

At mid-day, Rothacker uploads a new partner photo to the home page and at night she goes through the headlines on her Google Reader to refresh the home-page links. Whatever she posts on Thursday night stays through the weekend. She has also tried to continue training for alliance members on such subjects as fair use, search engine optimization, and photography.

In addition to recruiting partners, Charlotte’s Net-J project helped to seed two new sites. Villa Heights Voice,<sup>7</sup> which was created to cover one of the city’s mostly minority neighborhoods although it now primarily posts minutes of meetings. The other, HoodieCharlotte.

com, was short-lived and is now defunct. And, like with the other Net-J partnerships, about four of the alliance’s early partners have folded.

On a higher note, the Charlotte on the Cheap<sup>8</sup> blog has been so successful that author Jody Mace pens a Friday column for the newspaper on free stuff – for free. Also popular is the WXBradBlog,<sup>9</sup> written by meteorologist Brad Hanovich, which is a top referral site for charlotteobserver.com. Rothacker is happy that the Asheville-based Carolina Public Press<sup>10</sup> joined the alliance, giving The Observer some ears in Western North Carolina it never had before.

QCityMetro’s Burkins is happy with the partnership arrangement and has provided The Observer with some significant trial and breaking-news coverage.

Boraks said he would be happy to revisit a partnership agreement in the future “but it has to be mutually beneficial.”

Charlotte Observer Editor Rick Thames said the newspaper worked through tremendous concern about “preserving the brand” in participating in the project. He believes the agreement limiting the number of stories to be shared “seems to be as much as either site wants.”

Longer term, he hopes the alliance could develop a system “where we could share some advertising.” ■



**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.qcitymetro.com/>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://davidsonnews.net/>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.charlotteobserver.com>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.corneliusnews.net>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/1166/index.html>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://villaheightsvoice.com/section/neighborhood>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/jodymace/>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://wxbrad.com/>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.carolinapublicpress.org/>



*“Our modest success . . . proved that a major news provider in Arizona, either the Star or the Arizona Republic, could have great success creating a sports news network.”*

– Mark Evans | Editor, TucsonCitizen.com

## TucsonCitizen.com Sports Network

### Ramping Up Traffic

In May 2009, the afternoon Tucson Citizen newspaper shut down and its website was converted to a blogging site with content to be created by editor Mark Evans and as many community bloggers as he could lasso.

TucsonCitizen.com<sup>1</sup> (TC.com) was mostly a response to the complicated legal issues surrounding Gannett’s dissolving its joint operating agreement with the city’s Arizona Daily Star, owned by Lee Enterprises.

With a surprising proposal to J-Lab, Tucson Citizen became the Networked Journalism project’s first topic-oriented network and the only pilot project that involved digital-only partners.

While the site’s traffic at the time was decimated by the shutdown of the newspaper, it was still the city’s largest blog site.



After overtures to create a Tucson Citizen watchdog network didn’t pan out, Evans worked with Anthony Gimino, a freelance sports writer and a former Citizen sports columnist, to create a network of sports blogs initially focused on the University of Arizona’s Wildcats athletic teams.

TC Sports Network launched in September 2009 with six bloggers. Within a year, it grew to 10 partners with some focused ideas for expansion.



“The effort was an immediate success,” Evans reported. After the launch, “overall traffic to Tucson Citizen jumped 50 percent in one month.” He said it continued to climb, month over month, for more than a year. By spring 2010, Tucson Citizen created a home-page presence for the Sports Network and an inside sports page with a carousel of revolving images that aggregated the network’s blogs in one place.

The participating sports bloggers also saw traffic increases from Tucson Citizen referrals. As important, the Sports Network gave them credibility, press credentials and access to players. “Interview subjects are more likely to speak to a reporter who is with an accredited media organization rather than talk to an independent blogger,” Javier Morales, founder of WildAboutAZCats.net<sup>2</sup> told the Tucson Weekly. “TucsonCitizen.com was significant to our site in that regard.”

In the process, the TC Sports Network established a national footprint, with the likes of ESPN.com, The Seattle Times, The Oregonian, the Los Angeles Daily News, San Jose Mercury News and fan message boards from all over the country linking to network stories, Evans said.

Gimino, also a sports blogger, was hired part-time to manage the network. The ultimate hope was to keep adding sports bloggers until the network was attractive to advertisers.

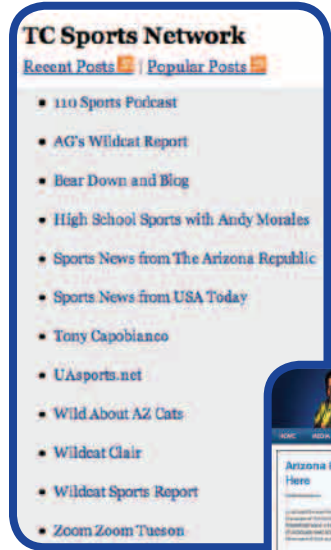
*Tucson Citizen got the benefit of multiple reporters at games, news conferences and daily coverage – and sometimes scooped the local daily.*

But by early 2011, the network was scaled back after the stipends for the bloggers ran out and the two-person Tucson Citizen operation was stymied in achieving a grander vision.

### Starting Out

In vetting partners, Tucson Citizen looked for reported sports blogs instead of opinionated fan-boy sites. Initial partners were WildAboutAZCats.net, founded by Javier Morales, a former basketball beat writer for the Arizona Daily Star; a top poster, Scott Terrell, on the UASports.net<sup>3</sup> message board; Wildcat Sports Report,<sup>4</sup> a university-affiliated sports site; Steve Rivera Ventures,<sup>5</sup> a website created by the former Arizona basketball beat writer for the Citizen; Still In Progress at Press Time<sup>6</sup> by sports writer Christopher Wuensch. Also participating, but out of the formal network, was High School Sports<sup>7</sup> with Andy Morales, who already had a popular blog on Tucson Citizen, and the 110 Sports<sup>8</sup> podcast with Matt Minkus, which posted podcast interviews with local and national sports figures and parsed them into a Q&A for Tucson Citizen.

The network partners shared stories, quotes, tips and contacts' phone numbers. Several posted breaking news simultaneously on their sites. Tucson Citizen got the benefit of multiple reporters at games, news conferences and daily coverage – and sometimes scooped the local daily.



*What's left of the Sports Network now appears on a directory of sports blogs.*



Tucson Citizen entered a partnership with local CBS affiliate KOLD for Wildcats coverage.

Tucson Citizen is feisty because as a small operation it has to be. Evans and Gimino wanted to keep expanding the network but that proved to be difficult.

There were too few well-reported sports blogs in Tucson, so they looked to grow in Phoenix, where there were numerous bloggers for the city's four professional sports teams plus Arizona State's athletics. They discussed some content swaps with a couple of partners, including their Gannett big brother, The Arizona Republic, based in Phoenix. These plans hinged on technology being in place to automate it and the idea didn't gel, Evans said.

The second idea was to build out the sports content on Tucson Citizen and then spin off the network into a stand-alone sports website and even a statewide sports network. Evans envisioned Tucson Citizen partnering with the Arizona Daily Star to sell ads and share some of the revenues with the network bloggers. "That idea also failed due to the complexities of the relationship between the two corporate partners, Gannett and Lee," he said.

The second year of funding bought a little more time for expansion and by late 2010, Gannett ponied up money to hire Gimino full-time. Nevertheless, when the stipends ran out, some of the bloggers stopped posting; others posted less frequently because their personal circumstances had changed.

Evans credits the Sports Network with significantly boosting traffic to Tucson Citizen. Eight of the top 22 blogs on Tucson Citizen between September 2009 and September 2010 were sports-related and they counted for nearly 20 percent of all page views to the site, he said. WildAboutAZCats alone sent more than 128,500 visits to TC.com in the first year.

*"I think with a little more manpower, we might have been able to pull it off."*

– Anthony Gimino  
Sports Network  
Coordinator

Moreover, the inbound links ratcheted up the site's Google ranking, and, with paid bloggers, the site started to be indexed in Google News and Yahoo News.

Still, while the network's traffic numbers were good, they were not great enough to draw interest from the advertising sales staff that Tucson Citizen shared with the Arizona Daily Star.

The remnants of the sports network still exist, but the home-page presence and portal page are gone. Sport stories come from about 10 participants, whose blogs are rolled into the Tucson Citizen's lineup of 100 other blogs, plus feeds from USA Today and The Arizona Republic. Only a handful of the bloggers post frequently.

The site ramped up a social-media effort in January 2011 with a part-time hire, and the sports blogs surfaced as the backbone of that effort. "Even though the sports network is dead, the sports blogs are shared on social media far more than any other content even though other blogs outnumber sports blogs nine to one," Evans said.

"I think with a little more manpower, we might have been able to pull it off," Gimino said. "But with two and a half people for a whole site, we found ourselves limited by manpower and, without even a little carrot of grant money, it was a hard sell."

Evans feels good about the project. "Our modest success, even though we were an outlier in the project due to our unique situation, proved that a major news provider in Arizona, either the Star or the Arizona Republic, could have great success creating a sports news network."

"TucsonCitizen.com is not the vehicle to do that; it lacks the sales, technological and administrative infrastructure to pull it off," Evans said. "But our near success despite our many handicaps proves it's a viable idea." ■

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://tucsoncitizen.com/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://wildaboutazcats.net/blog/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.uasports.net/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://arizona.247sports.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://tucsoncitizen.com/steveriveraventures/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://inprogressatpresstime.blogspot.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://tucsoncitizen.com/highschoolsports/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.110sportspodcast.com/>

*“If you do hyperlocal, be realistic about how often someone wants to write about something.”*

– Suzanne Levinson | Director of Site Operations, The Miami Herald

# Miami Community News Network

## Building On-Site Partner Channels

From the very start, The Miami Herald baked advertising opportunities into its Community News Partners<sup>1</sup> project.

In some respects, this was easier to do than at the other Net-J sites because The Herald elected to have its parent company, McClatchy, develop a common web platform and content management system that all the partners could use to post and share content. Even if the partners had their own websites, they needed to post stories and links on their “channel” on miamiherald.com.

The Miami Net-J project was the only pilot site that required partner links and stories to appear on discrete partner pages<sup>2</sup> inside the newspaper’s website.

In addition to links to the latest stories, each partner page provided two ad spots that partners could sell – and retain all the revenue – and a couple spots The Herald could sell.

“We emphasized with our partners that we were not posting content and were not selling ads,” said Suzanne Levinson, then The Herald’s director of site operations.

“We felt like we gave them the store: ‘You get 100 percent of the revenue on this.’ ”

But despite a strong initial network of partners, including some former competitors, not much advertising was sold for these spots. By the fall of 2012, only a few of the partners were posting regularly and several had gone belly up, attesting to the fragility of so many community news start-ups.

“Our goal, from the start, was to answer the question: In an era of start-up websites, community bloggers and smaller metro newsrooms, what role does a big media organization play in fostering local coverage in a large, diverse community,” Rick Hirsch, now The Herald’s managing editor, said in reporting on the launch of the network. The channels on the miamiherald.com were one response.

The first five partners included two weekly newspaper organizations. Community Newspapers Inc.,<sup>3</sup> a long-time competitor that covers small municipalities in South Miami, Pinecrest and Palmetto Bay. Curtis Publishing’s River Cities Gazette<sup>4</sup> covered Miami Springs, Virginia



A home-page queue highlights stories and photos from Herald News Partners.



Gardens and Medley and it also published weekly football magazines, including one for the Miami Dolphins. The Net-J project gave these two companies the first online presence they ever had.

GablesHomePage.com,<sup>5</sup> launched by the Coral Gables Community Foundation with a matching Knight Foundation grant, would operate the network's Coral Gables channel<sup>6</sup> – plus its own website. Rounding out the partnership were two new start-ups, the Key Biscayne Times, headed by a former journalist, and West Kendall

Today,<sup>7</sup> to be created by Ana Acle-Menendez, a former Herald reporter and editor, who wanted to publish bi-lingual content for the city's Southwest, mostly Hispanic suburbs.

Each partner got a clever avatar that accompanied their posts, and links to their content could be followed from two visible community-news spots on The Miami Herald's home page.<sup>8</sup>



Before long, The Herald was attracting other partners, including The Coconut Grove Grapevine,<sup>9</sup> Orthodox Miami,<sup>10</sup> Haitian Link<sup>11</sup> and Biscayne Corridor.<sup>12</sup> At its height, the Community News Partners pages got a million page views in a month with a few particularly popular stories, but the typical traffic is still about 500,000 page views a month, said Levinson, now McClatchy's Director of Digital News.

Not long after the launch, Community Newspapers created its own website and its partner posts dropped off. Key Biscayne Times went out of business and Acle-Menendez got a full-time job, which reduced her activity. Both the Coconut Grove Grapevine and GrandAveNews.org, a University of Miami site, went dark.

“Grand Ave was an amazing teaching tool and we got the best work ever out of our students with it,” said its founder Kim Grinfeder, who launched the site with New Voices<sup>13</sup> funding from J-Lab. He had hoped to integrate the news site into the journalism curriculum to keep it going, “but I failed to produce the change needed in our department to implement it,” he said.

Today, The Herald’s Community News Network pages are populated with some partner articles and also relevant stories produced by The Herald’s reporters.

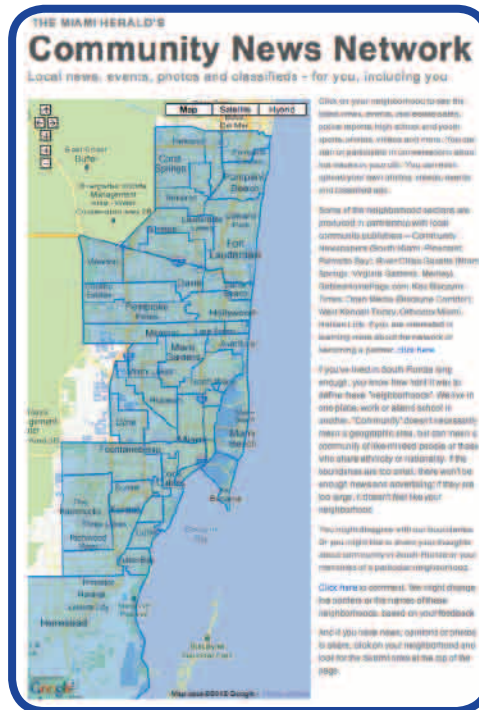
Jared Goyette, who worked for The Herald and helped produce content for the Biscayne Corridor channel, said there was “one central flaw” in the project.

“This whole thing depended on small independent publishers sell-

ing ads on a platform that wasn’t theirs,” said Goyette, who recently moved to Sacramento, Calif., to be editor-in-chief of the hyperlocal Sacramento Press. “Any model that depended on that wasn’t going to work.”

Goyette said the bloggers who were enthusiastic about their own sites didn’t really have the skills to sell ads on The Miami Herald’s site.

He did, however, credit The Herald with being “very generous in the amount of exposure they gave to their bloggers.”



Levinson acknowledged that the level of partner posting had subsided. “If you do hyperlocal, be realistic about how often someone wants to write about something,” she advised.

She doesn’t regret having one website to handle all partner content and sell ads.

“It was a wonderful project. Remnants of it are still here,” Levinson said. “It has changed the way the newsroom thinks about community news.”

**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/community-news/>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/2009/11/16/1336110/about-the-community-news-network.html>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.communitynewspapers.com/>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/river-cities/>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.gableshomepage.com>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/coral-gables/>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/west-kendall/>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://coconutgrovegrapevine.blogspot.com/>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/orthodox-miami/>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/haitian-link/>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://www.miamiherald.com/biscayne-corridor>
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.j-newvoices.org/>

*"I really felt like [the newsroom was] in a ton of stress while we were doing this. They still are."*

– Angie Newsome | WNC LINC Project Manager

# WNC LINC: Western North Carolina Local Information Cooperative

## Sharing Via Widgets and Blogs

The Asheville Citizen-Times (AC-T) got off to a strong start on building tools and recruiting partners for a network of news sites in the Blue Ridge Mountains region of Western North Carolina.

But no sooner did the original project managers leave with the end of their first-year contracts than the project tanked – amid significant upheaval in this Gannett newsroom.

We note, with considerable irony, that one of those managers, Angie Newsome, soon launched her own statewide public-policy reporting site, Carolina Public Press.<sup>1</sup> It has hatched partnerships with several other news outlets in the state, including The Charlotte Observer. “When we started . . . I contacted the AC-T several times, but got no response,” she said. “I thought it was a no brainer.”



**Disclosure:** Angie Newsome's Carolina Public Press won one of the 2012 New Media Women Entrepreneur Awards funded by J-Lab and supported by the McCormick Foundation.

Despite initial high energy, Asheville's story is one of momentum lost, high-touch coordination disappearing, an odd assortment of partners, and a yawning newsroom-leadership vacuum.

In late 2009, Newsome and co-manager Lydia Carrington, both former AC-T staffers, were hired as contractors to manage the project. They quickly branded the initiative WNC LINC, the Western North Carolina Local Information Cooperative,<sup>2</sup> and started

a project blog.<sup>3</sup> They also developed a widget for partners to use on their websites and AC-T's home page. It featured RSS feeds of the top headlines and paragraphs of partner stories and was designed to drive traffic to partner sites. All of Asheville's Net-J partners managed to get the widget<sup>4</sup> or a widget button working on their sites.

A landing page was added to the AC-T website<sup>5</sup> and a project link was added to the home page's navigation bar. For a while the project had a news feed near the bottom of the home page. The project never did add live news feeds to the landing page. While the widgets have largely disappeared, partners still occasionally share content via a Twitter account.

Recruiting partners turned out to be difficult. Two of the most logical prospects declined to participate. In the



**WNC LINC's widget helped partners share content links.**



case of the lively AshVegas,<sup>6</sup> founder Jason Sandford was working at the time for the AC-T's chief competitor.

Moreover there was skepticism about whether the newspaper really just wanted free content and possible control of the partner sites, Newsome said.

The first partners were AskAsheville.com,<sup>7</sup> a local news site; Montford.org,<sup>8</sup> a website for the historic Montford neighborhood; The Artful Parent,<sup>9</sup> a parent and art blog; and the Southern Highland Reader, a news and opinion site later spun into the Tuckasegee Reader that was published at www.tuckareader.com.

The Artful Parent was robust enough that its founder Jean Van't Hul was later recruited to write a column for the paper's parenting magazine. She was a willing but head-scratching partner. "I naturally find (and take advantage of) opportunities for collaboration with other parenting/art blogs, but am having trouble seeing such opportunities with WNC LINC that seem appropriate for the topic and feel of my blog," she offered in a first-year evaluation.

Montford.org ended up sharing an important crime story on a brutal neighborhood mugging that the newsroom found invaluable. TuckReader.com halted publication last year after one of its editors, Giles Morris, was hired to be editor of C-ville.com in Charlottesville, Va.



Four college/university sites were also recruited to be in the network. The Hilltop,<sup>10</sup> the student newspaper of Mars College; The Blue Banner<sup>11</sup> of the University of North Carolina-Asheville; The Appalachian Online<sup>12</sup> from Appalachian State University; and Western Carolina University, which was planning to develop a student news site. Two more university sites were added later.

By the start of the second year, the project had eight partners, of which four were affiliated with colleges or universities. WNC LINC soon found that the university sites were dormant when the schools were not in session, and the changing cast of editors made coordination challenging.

While the project had sought partner sites that posted frequent, original news content, "by necessity we had to broaden our pool of partners," Newsome said. Requirements became looser and the focus was more on potential rather than past performance.

The project developed a Memorandum of Understanding and a content-sharing agreement that codified expectations and guidelines of sharing and attributing content.

The stipends paid to the initial partners "went a long way in building trust in the community and countering claims that the newspaper simply wanted content for free," Newsome said. Moreover, the funds helped all the partners to either launch or improve their sites.

Newsome reported that she tried to connect the partners to key editors in the AC-T newsroom, invit-





ing them to a morning news budget meeting, and training the paper's online department on how to share partner content. However, layoffs creamed the newsroom, editors were not fully engaged, and partners were reporting minimal increases in traffic.

"The Citizen Times is responsible to make sure traffic comes to the WNC LINC," Ask Asheville founder Gary Charles reported after the first year. "This is not working properly."

Most hurtful, the Gannett newsroom was without a top editor for fully a year after Executive Editor Phil Fernandez, who had initiated the project, left in November 2010 to become editor for the Bristol Herald Courier, a Media General paper in Bristol, Va.

It wasn't until late 2011 that Randy Hammer, the paper's president and publisher, was charged with also leading the newsroom. Newsome, however, noted that he did make it a point early on to meet with all the Net-J partners.

The partners met with the AC-T's advertising staff to discuss ideas for generating and sharing revenue. One idea was to build an advertising widget similar to the content widget. At the partners' request, an advertising training session was held in June 2010 to help the sites identify potential advertisers, pitch ads and set rates. They were also trained in the use of social media.

By September 2010, the project was added to the portfolio of Jason Sandford, the AshVegas founder who had returned to the AC-T as a columnist and reporter. Sandford was thought to be the "perfect person" to shepherd the partnership, Hammer said.



However, Sandford was also focused on a separate partnership between AshVegas and the newspaper. "My site is not an official WNC LINC partner, but it certainly could be," he said, although he expressed some discomfort with a role as both project partner and project coordinator.

Sandford said he tried to "re-energize" the project and had plans to build out WNC LINC Facebook and YouTube pages, but internal support was lacking. Early discussions about monetizing the collaboration were met with disagreement among partners "about what kinds of ads they would allow on their site."

In August 2011, Tuck Reader's Morris complained to J-Lab that, even though his site was listed on the AC-T website as a WNC LINC participant, he could elicit no response from the paper.

"We had better luck with Mountain Xpress<sup>13</sup> and North Carolina Public Press in terms of content sharing in a meaningful way," he said.

By December 2011, Hammer acknowledged the partnership was inactive, although he said he had aspirations to revive it. The landing page still exists.

Newsome said she thinks it would have been better if the project had been managed inside the newsroom so there could be face-to-face contact with newsroom leaders, better communication and more effort to get shared content online and into print.

"I really felt like [the newsroom was] in a ton of stress while we were doing this," Newsome said. "They still are." ■

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.carolinapublicpress.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.citizen-times.com/section/LINC/WNC-LINC>

<sup>3</sup> <http://blogs.citizen-times.com/blogs/index.php?blog=65&p=9431&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1>

<sup>4</sup> <http://blog.askasheville.com/asheville/asheville-wnc-linc-local-information-cooperative>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.citizen-times.com/section/LINC/WNC-LINC>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ashvegas.com/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.askasheville.com/wnc\\_widget.php](http://www.askasheville.com/wnc_widget.php)

<sup>8</sup> <http://montford.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.artfulparent.typepad.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://hilltopmhc.weebly.com/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://thebluebanner.net/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.theappalachianonline.com>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.mountainx.com/>

*"I was enthusiastic about this, but I had no idea how transformative this would be for us. It changed the center of gravity for our whole organization."*

– David Shribman | Executive Editor, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

# Pipeline News Partners

## Juicing Original Content

In early 2010 the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette was invited to participate in a Networked Journalism pilot project. It didn't take long for editors to circle back with a new vision for a partnership.

With small energy companies swarming the region looking to lock in leases for natural-gas drilling rights, the paper proposed a topic-based project focused on the many implications of fracking in the Marcellus Shale.

With that large swath of sedimentary rock snaking under most of Western Pennsylvania, competing assertions were ricocheting around the region in ways that left

landowners besieged, municipalities beleaguered and politicians benefitting.

"It was a tsunami of change and interests," said Jim Russell, founder of Burgh Diaspora,<sup>1</sup> a blog about Rust Belt economies and one of the network's original partners. "Money was flowing in . . . For the most part, Pennsylvania was caught completely unaware."

The Post-Gazette (P-G) proposed a thematic network built around a website dedicated to ongoing coverage of drilling for natural gas, but it would have a wider zone of coverage, across Appalachia, than the newspaper itself does.

The project is unique in that it is the only Net-J pilot site that developed a discrete website with original content. The site, Pipeline,<sup>2</sup> launched on Feb. 27, 2011, becoming a "start-up operation inside a legacy newsroom," said project leader and lead reporter Erich Schwartzel. "Our greatest success has been introducing gas-drilling coverage to communities where drilling is rampant, but investigative journalism is not."

The site's journalists and partners had to quickly ramp up their knowledge of complex leases for drilling rights, infrastructure for transporting the gas, and the effects of supply and demand on pricing. They had to track various taxing ideas, local ordinances and state laws. Most important, they had to understand the political, environmental and economic





Post-Gazette deputy managing editor Mary Leonard with Pipeline editor Erich Schwartzel and Pipeline contributor Elisabeth Ponsot

forces at work. By all accounts, they did a notable job.

The site was jump-started with content from some unconventional partners recruited for the network. It was soon populated with daily news, enterprise stories, curated headlines from elsewhere,

various Twitter feeds, as well as reports from the business news staff and newspaper's statehouse bureau in Harrisburg. It hosts a map of shale well permits, a list of local ordinances and an interactive timeline.

Just six months after its launch, Pipeline was honored as the year's Best Specialty website by the Online News Association. In the spring of 2012 it snagged a \$10,000 Scripps Howard Award for environmental reporting and a "best blog" award from the Society of American Business Writers and Editors.

"It's so much more than I ever imagined it could be," said Mary Leonard, deputy managing editor, who credits the project with being a "catalyst" in the newsroom.

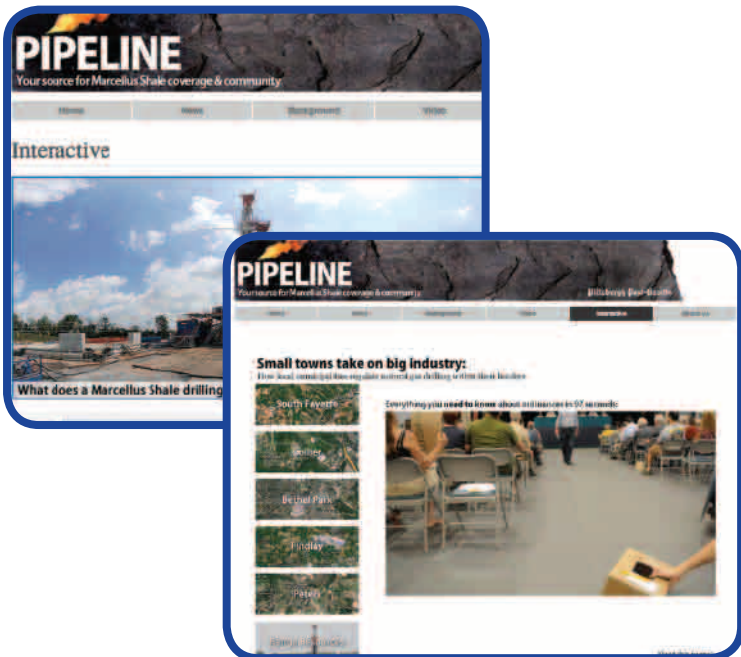
Editor David Shribman agrees. "What you guys did for us was to allow us to reach potential we didn't know we had and to make what was peripheral central."

"All because of your organization, we are doing things we weren't doing before on the web and in the community."

The Pipeline project resulted in far more original reporting and co-publishing than most of the other Networked Journalism projects. The partnership itself, however, is less widely publicized although its existence is easier to discover on the latest iteration of the website. Unlike participants in the other Net-J projects, most of the Pipeline News Partners do not know one another and have not been brought together for training. While there is shared content, there is little cross-promotion among the partners. Original partners include:

*"Our greatest success has been introducing gas-drilling coverage to communities where drilling is rampant, but investigative journalism is not."*  
 — Erich Schwartzel  
 Project leader

- **Burgh Diaspora**, which focuses on migration and economic development. Jim Russell was recruited after urging media to pick up on some of the energy-company developments he was witnessing. In the early going, he sent weekly blog posts, most of which Pipeline published.



*The Pipeline project resulted in far more original reporting and co-publishing than most of the other Networked Journalism projects.*

- **Allegheny Front**,<sup>3</sup> a weekly half-hour show on WYEP-FM public radio that covers Western Pennsylvania environmental issues and is picked up by other stations. It has invited Schwartzel to be on the air, has repackaged audio from Post-Gazette videographers to run as full stories on its programs and also used P-G photos to illustrate its web stories.
- **Frac Tracker**,<sup>4</sup> originally a project of the University of Pittsburgh School of Public Health that recently spun into a nonprofit alliance. It chronicles the impact of the global shale gas industry by collecting, interpreting and sharing data and visualizations. Its most recent contribution to Pipeline is a map of fracking bans in New York.
- **Andrea Iglar**, a freelance reporter who has focused on tracking the patchwork of ordinances drafted by individual communities to regulate the gas drilling.
- Filmmaker **Kirsi Jansa**, who was funded by the Pittsburgh Foundation to produce a series of short documentaries called "Gas Rush Stories"<sup>5</sup> on how fracking is impacting the region.

Partners were given between \$2,000 and \$4,000 from the J-Lab funding.

Kathy Knauer, Allegheny Front's executive producer, has been pleased with the partnership, especially as a way to promote her program's content. "We are a small independently produced environmental program," she said. "The Post-Gazette has much more visibility."

In early 2012, she said Allegheny Front also signed on to have an editing group work with Kirsi Jansa to help her make her documentaries more balanced and "less advocacy-driven."

Pipeline has been creative in its use of social media and in developing interactive elements. For instance, it launched "In the Pipeline,"<sup>6</sup> a weekly video show that analyzed the week's news and solicited reader questions via Twitter. They developed a Pipeline news widget, but efforts to get other news outlets to post it didn't get much traction.

Early in the project Pipeline and Allegheny Front employed a Facebook challenge to see who could be the first to get 1,000 likes.





*“The problem with some of these topic sites is that they can make enemies and we have to walk a fine line to avoid advocacy.”*  
 — Mary Leonard  
 Deputy Managing Editor

Pipeline’s Facebook page<sup>7</sup> won, earning them a berth on the show.

When Pipeline journalists noticed that most of their Facebook posts were coming from anti-fracking folks, they began posting Pipeline content on sites that advocated for hydraulic fracturing to generate more diverse activity, Schwartzel said.

The Post-Gazette’s sales department has sold some advertising on Pipeline and has been seeking a sponsor for the new Pipeline mobile site. Schwartzel has participated in the P-G’s series of town-hall energy forums, which were underwritten by a local law firm. The natural-gas industry has provided no advertising support or partnership opportunities to Pipeline.

Publishing a topical website on a politically charged issue requires a balancing act for the newsroom. “The problem

with some of these topic sites is that they can make enemies,” said Leonard, the site’s supervising editor, “and we have to walk a fine line to avoid advocacy.”

Indeed, after Pipeline developed more robust content, blogger Jim Russell said he moved from writing blog posts to contributing more often to Pipeline’s Facebook page because it gave him “more freedom” to be involved as a citizen participant. Serving as a Pipeline blogger “weighed on me,” he said. “I didn’t feel I could blog as aggressively as I would like.”

Russell credits Pipeline’s investigations and reporting with “getting the public up to speed in an information desert.”

“They have contributed to the global narrative of fracking.” ■

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> <http://burghdiaspora.blogspot.com>  
<sup>2</sup> <http://pipeline.post-gazette.com>  
<sup>3</sup> <http://alleghefront.org>  
<sup>4</sup> <http://fractracker.org>  
<sup>5</sup> [http://www.kirsijansa.com/Gas\\_Rush\\_Stories.html](http://www.kirsijansa.com/Gas_Rush_Stories.html)  
<sup>6</sup> <http://pipeline.post-gazette.com/video>  
<sup>7</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/pipelinePG>

*"We will always do our brand of verified, deeply reported journalism – that's what we know. But we believe journalism can, and should, include a much broader range of coverage, and we don't necessarily think only our journalists can do that work."*

– Peter Bhatia | Editor, The Oregonian

# Oregonian News Network

## Nurturing a Big Tent for Journalism

The Oregonian was invited to join the second round of pilot projects and from the beginning looked to The Seattle Times' network as an important model.

However, instead of adding all the partners iteratively, the Oregonian News Network (ONN) grew from two parallel efforts: one focused on building an alliance of Net-J news partners<sup>1</sup> and the other on building partnerships with community blogs.<sup>2</sup>

By June 2011, The Oregonian had recruited nine Net-J news partners, created a logo and began promoting the network as "independent, interactive journalism across Oregon."

Simultaneously, some 50 community bloggers were being courted by veteran editor George Rede to partner with The Oregonian. Mostly lifestyle blogs, these sites focused on everything from food to public affairs, arts and entertainment to the outdoors and recreation.

By early 2012, both networks were combined under the Oregonian News Network (ONN)<sup>3</sup> rubric. Cornelius Swart, who was the part-time Net-J project coordinator, was hired full-time to shepherd the combined network as well as work on the paper's OregonLive.com<sup>4</sup> website. Swart had been embedded in the newsroom from the start of the Net-J project. Previously, he was also an indie news publisher, putting out the Portland Sentinel, which focused on North Portland.

"What began as an experiment in providing more content for a newspaper site and more traffic for hyperlocal sites has evolved into an important engagement program," Swart said.

As of fall 2012, the network had about 48 partners and they had posted some 2,400 stories to the OregonLive.com website.



One of the program's biggest successes was improving the quality of indie journalism through a series of training sessions. The Oregonian even launched a News Buddy<sup>5</sup> mentoring program that paired a hyperlocal site publisher



with a veteran journalist for two weeks of advice and journalism tips.

Among the project’s hurdles was trying to work around Advance Internet’s rigid web template, which made any ONN home-page presence difficult. The ONN partnership also had to deflect a few slaps from Willamette Week,<sup>6</sup> a competitive alternative weekly for the Portland area.

### How It Worked

Swart said the size and complexity of the news operations of The Oregonian and OregonLive.com made it challenging to aggregate news from the partners. OregonLive.com could not post headline links to partner stories like Seattle did, and The Oregonian did not want to republish partner content like The Miami Herald and Charlotte Observer were doing.

Initially, ONN developed its own, rather labor-intensive method: RSS feeds came into two Oregon News Network landing pages.<sup>7</sup>



Those feeds then linked to a “synopsis” page,<sup>8</sup> which housed excerpts of partner stories that were posted by Oregonian editors. It was only at the bottom of these pages that a link back to the partner source finally appeared. These excerpted content “nodes” also got topic tags that could place them in other topic “wells” on the site. For instance, a biking story might also be tagged to a particular neighborhood.

More recently, partners have been allowed to post their own excerpts directly onto OregonLive. They go into a queue, where Swart approves them and promotes them to the appropriate web pages. “The new method is gaining popularity among partners and saves considerable time,” he said.

While there is no ONN home-page presence, editors can decide that a partner story is worth including in the page’s headline links. A recent home-page redesign has made it easy to move partner excerpts to the home page on a story-by-story basis, Swart said. An ONN headline widget does appear on some internal pages.<sup>9</sup>

After the first year, however, partners reported that they got only small bumps in traffic from participating in the network. Concerned that readers might not know to click over to full partner stories from the synopsis pages, Swart has tried an information box with excerpts to cue readers that the posts are aggregated content.

In July 2011 Willamette Week criticized ONN for featuring “sponsored content” on OregonLive, basically headlines on the ONN page. These headlines were mostly

being pulled in from partner site Neighborhood Notes,<sup>10</sup> where it was clearly labeled as paid content. The problem was that ONN’s RSS feed was picking up both headlines from news posts and from sponsored posts. The latter, Willamette Week asserted, violated ONN’s Standards and Practices. ONN adjusted the RSS feed so that only news content showed up on the network’s landing page.

Yet another Willamette Week article criticized the inclusion of Oregon Capital News as a partner because it was a project of the

*“People recognize that our stuff is showing up on Oregon Live. That partnership gives an extra oomph, a little more legitimacy, to what we are doing, and they are more receptive to what we are offering.”*

– Ken Aaron | Co-founder, NeighborhoodNotes.com

Cascade Policy Institute, a Libertarian think tank. Oregonian editors said they found the site’s reporting to be independent and unbiased. By year’s end, however, the site had lost its support and shut down.

### Starting with an Aspiration

Editor Peter Bhatia said he wanted to make OregonLive.com “a central place for local news – however you define it.”

“We also believe in a ‘big-tent’ theory of journalism. We will always do our brand of verified, deeply reported journalism – that’s what we know,” he said. “But we believe journalism can and should include a much broader range of coverage and we don’t necessarily think only our journalists can do that work.”

The Oregonian decided to give partners \$2,500 each with some set aside for later partners or a potential hyperlocal start-up.

Ten partners were recruited for the first year. Among them were My Eugene, which covered news and community meetings in Eugene, Ore.; Bike Portland,<sup>11</sup> which covered the city’s robust cycling scene; The Lund Report,<sup>12</sup> which produces high-quality journalism about the health care and insurance industry; NeighborhoodNotes, which



reported news from Portland’s 95 organized neighborhoods; North Coast Oregon,<sup>13</sup> covering the Columbia Pacific region; and Clark County Blog,<sup>14</sup> covering the area around Vancouver, the state’s fourth largest city.

A second tier of partners, not receiving funding, included The Yaquina Wavelength,<sup>15</sup> a community newspaper and website for the central Oregon coast; The Skanner,<sup>16</sup> an African-American owned publication covering metro Portland; and Oregon Capitol News, which covered news from the state capitol until it closed last year.

Like in the other pilot networks, not all the participants were stable contributors. By the end of the first year, both Oregon Capitol News and Clark County Blog shut down, and My Eugene halted publication in the fall of 2012 after its owner relocated for a new job. Bike Portland left the network for mission reasons. The Lund Report produced a major investigative story for the newspaper in the summer of 2012 but some free-lance contract issues emerged that ended its network affiliation.







Neighborhood Notes, however, began producing a weekly freelance business column, Open and Shut, listing retail openings and closings for the paper. Several other partners have become regular Oregonian freelancers.

Oregonian reporters were at first concerned about the network but ended up finding it added content and posting frequency to their “wells,” Swart said.

While referral traffic from ONN was small, “partners appear to benefit from and appreciate both trainings, networking opportunities and being a part of the club,” Swart said. They got to use photos from the newspaper’s archives and got some access to research tools such as Lexis Nexis. North Coast Oregon got a new website so it

could better participate in ONN. The Oregonian featured some of the partners in house ads in the paper, and in a Q&A series<sup>17</sup> on OregonLive, and it worked hard to meet requests for training.

The Oregonian held a early “Business for Bloggers” training session and a more recent session on publishing for niche blogs.<sup>18</sup> It trained partners in using databases, including the Oregon Judicial Department’s database and provided video training for mobile devices. When partners said they needed help hiring freelancers, ONN created a freelance reporter referral database.

The Oregonian also helped partners differentiate between news, advocacy and paid content. Paid content was emerging as an issue because it was becoming an important source of revenue for the start-ups.

“The biggest surprises of the year,” Swart said, “was seeing how eager hyperlocals were to learn new reporting skills and how widely it has been embraced by the public and the local ecosystem.”

In a video<sup>19</sup> explaining ONN, Ken Aaron, co-founder of NeighborhoodNotes.com, said that another benefit of the partnership surfaced in making sales calls to prospective advertisers.

“People recognize that our stuff is showing up on Oregon Live. That partnership gives an extra oomph, a little more legitimacy, to what we are doing, and they are more receptive to what we are offering.” ■

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.oregonlive.com/on/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oregonlive.com/community-news/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.oregonlive.com>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/index.ssf/2012/02/blournalism\\_a\\_discussion\\_on\\_bl.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/index.ssf/2012/02/blournalism_a_discussion_on_bl.html)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.wweek.com/portland/>

<sup>7</sup> <feed://impact.oregonlive.com/news-network/atom.xml>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/index.ssf/2012/10/as\\_union\\_battles\\_trimet\\_over\\_b.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/index.ssf/2012/10/as_union_battles_trimet_over_b.html)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.neighborhoodnotes.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://bikeportland.org/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.thelundreport.org/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.northcoastoregon.com>

<sup>14</sup> <http://clarkcountyblog.com/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://yaquinawavelength.com/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.theskanner.com/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://topics.oregonlive.com/tag/on%20partner%20interviews/index.html>

<sup>18</sup> <http://topics.oregonlive.com/tag/on%20partner%20interviews/index.html>

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/index.ssf/2012/01/welcome\\_to\\_the\\_oregonian\\_news\\_1.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/news-network/index.ssf/2012/01/welcome_to_the_oregonian_news_1.html)

*"I believe these emerging news organizations are performing a valuable news service, reporting news I don't see elsewhere, or reporting more deeply than our general-interest newspapers."*

– Bruce Koon | News Director, KQED Public Radio

# KQED's News Associates Project

## Boosting On-Air Credibility

KQED, the most-listened-to station in the San Francisco area, was the only public broadcaster to spearhead a Net-J partnership. News Director Bruce Koon saw it as a chance to test-drive "a new iteration" of a news and partnership model.

Unlike other Net-J projects, KQED's News Associates would not only share links and content, they would also participate in news reports for radio.

"There are changes in media today that continue to make collaborations more complicated," Koon told a J-Lab/Online News Association workshop<sup>1</sup> in September 2012. "Partners are more than just link swaps. They have to be a partner contributing."

KQED launched its project with considerable press pickup on Aug. 10, 2011. At the same time, it announced it would share food-related content with Huffington-Post San Francisco. By fall 2012, the number of partners had grown from five to eight<sup>2</sup> and Koon regarded the collaboration as "successfully integrated into the daily work flow" of KQED News and

KQEDNews.org. The project's Community News Coordinators played a critical role.

Here's how it worked: Stories from partner sites automatically flow into KQED's content management system via RSS feeds. The news coordinator reviews the stories and selects those to be featured on the station's Bay Area news page<sup>3</sup> and outside on the KQEDNews.org home page.<sup>4</sup>

On both pages the selected stories flow into a so-called "queue," a horizontal module that features a total of four stories with photos. A new story lands in the first spot on the module and the oldest story cycles off. On the home page, however, News Associate stories must compete for play with other KQED blogs and features.



*A home-page queue features partner headlines and photos.*

The Community News Coordinators – initially Molly Samuel and now Katrina Swartz – have another important task. They select News Associate stories they will "pitch" to KQED news editors for radio. Successful pitches lead to "debriefs" where KQED news anchors interview partner reporters about their stories. The partners get identified and credited on the air for their participation and information. These on-air stories also get a link from KQED's News Fix<sup>5</sup> news blog.

KQED aired 62 reporter debriefs between May 2011 and mid-October 2012. This also meant, however, that

partners that focused on newsy, daily stories were more frequently on the air.



For instance, when Oakland's police chief suddenly resigned, Jennifer Inez Ward of Oakland Local<sup>6</sup> was debriefed on what happened. Since it became a partner, Oakland Local has participated in 25 on-air debriefs, founder Susan Mernit said.

"KQED has great good will in the community," Molly

Samuel said. "The people we worked with were happy to have their names attached to ours."

KQED picked its initial five partners from some 62 local sites. KQED aimed for partners that covered targeted geographic areas, had a journalistic mindset, updated regularly and were interested enough in collaboration that they would view the partnership as "more than a distribution agreement," Koon said. KQED's goal was to expand the public radio station's offerings of breaking news and "good reads" to its nine-county regional audience. KQED also has a separate partnership with the Center for Investigative Reporting's California Watch project.

A central precept, he said, was: "What can we as partners do together than neither of us could do alone?"

The initial five partners were Berkeleyside,<sup>7</sup> as well as Oakland Local, which works with under-served communities in Oakland, CA; and NeighborWebSJ,<sup>8</sup> an online news



site for San Jose. (Both of these sites were launched with the help of J-Lab/New Voices<sup>9</sup> seed funding). Later added were San Francisco Public Press,<sup>10</sup> which covers public-interest news and publishes a quarterly print edition; and Ocean Beach Bulletin,<sup>11</sup> which covers coastal development and other issues in this beachside community. Each got \$4,000 stipends.



Also coming on board were Peninsula Press,<sup>12</sup> a Stanford University student-reported site covering mid-Peninsula news; Richmond Confidential,<sup>13</sup> which uses UC-Berkeley journalism students to cover Richmond, CA; and San Jose Beez,<sup>14</sup> which is a collaboration of ethnic media outlets covering San Jose and the South Bay. KQED drafted a Memo of Understanding for the partners to sign.

The news release announcing the launch got some cheers but also a little pushback from some commenters who criticized public radio for partnering with commercial media, as some of the initial partners were.

However, concerns about advocacy in media trumped concerns about commercial media and prompted KQED to make its News Associates criteria narrower than expected.

"The question of local news organizations that don't mind

being viewed as advocates was more problematic than I anticipated," Koon said. "And the issue was about more



than just different definitions of what constitutes 'news.'

For instance, KQED had hoped to partner with StreetsBlog SF,<sup>15</sup> a news site about the livable-cities movement that covers efforts to reduce the dependence on cars and improve conditions for pedestrians, cyclists and mass-transit riders.

But the station's management wasn't comfortable partnering with an advocacy site. As a public-radio station, KQED has different concerns than a commercial newspaper, Koon said. "We fall into fairness issues in the FTC guidelines. Also our nonprofit status puts us in a different frame of mind than a commercial newspaper, which can have a separate editorial board that does things like endorsements."

KQED has had several training sessions for the News Associates. In an early session, the partners asked for more radio-broadcast training. So, they learned how to use iPhone apps, record interviews, get ambient sound – generally what makes for good radio. KQED also knew that links off its website to the partner sites might not drive significant traffic to its partners but airtime would. Koon noted that if the News Associates actually collect audio tape with their stories, KQED in the future could pay them as freelancers. At a recent training in September 2012, about 30 participants from five different participating organizations learned how to compose and shoot good photos.

Oakland Local's Mernit said the partnership has been great for her site: "We got a level of exposure and credibility that was very, very valuable to us."



While the collaboration has primarily been one-way, with Oakland Local sending stories to KQED, it has turned into a "reciprocal" relationship, where the station will check to see what Oakland Local is planning to cover. "Ten percent of the time, we weren't going to, but since you're interested, we will," Mernit tells them.

She also makes a point of eliciting agreements in advance from her reporters, who get paid little or nothing, so that they are willing to participate in the KQED debriefs.

Koon cites several of his takeaways:

- Non-broadcast news organizations can work successfully with broadcast news organizations. The partnership, for instance, allowed KQED Public Radio to cover a story like Occupy Oakland more extensively, and in some cases the partner "was the main reporting source for us."
- Partnerships require an editor. "We're facing the daunting task of how to keep this going." KQED was able to cobble enough support to hire Katrina Schwartz through September 2012 to replace Molly Samuel.
- Emerging news organizations continue to grow in the delivery of solid news with strong journalism values.

"I believe these emerging news organizations are performing a valuable news service, reporting news I don't see elsewhere," Koon said, "or reporting more deeply than our general-interest newspapers." ■

**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.j-lab.org/workshops/category/summits/entrepreneur-4.0/video>
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.kqed.org/news/bayarea/partner-about.jsp>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.kqed.org/news/bayarea/>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.kqed.org/news>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://blogs.kqed.org/newsfix/>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://oaklandlocal.com/>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://www.berkeleyside.com/>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.neighborwebsj.com/>
- <sup>9</sup> <http://www.j-newvoices.org/>
- <sup>10</sup> <http://sfpublicpress.org/>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://oceanbeachbulletin.com/>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://peninsulapress.com/>
- <sup>13</sup> <http://richmondconfidential.org/>
- <sup>14</sup> <http://www.sjbeez.org/>
- <sup>15</sup> <http://sf.streetsblog.org/>

*"I don't have the time to keep that thing going.  
It was a good idea."*

– Dennis Anderson | Managing Editor, Lawrence Journal-World

# Northeast Kansas News Network Syndicating Content

The Lawrence Journal-World joined the Net-J project as an added starter only in early 2011 after J-Lab efforts to work with another news organization ended.

Ten months and three significant staff departures later, the Kansas News Network was left as "kind of an orphan," with no one in the news room having the bandwidth to champion it, said Managing Editor Dennis Anderson.

*...it was the only Net-J project that attempted to actually sell partner content...*

The effort was notable in that it was the only Net-J project that attempted to actually sell partner content – some for as little as \$5 a story.

The vehicle for this was StoryMarket.com,<sup>1</sup> a new content network launched in February 2011 by The World Co., the LJ-World's publisher and an industry leader in multimedia storytelling. StoryMarket was designed to help syndicators, publishers, freelancers and bloggers buy, sell or share content.

Initial efforts to create the project were led by Jane Stevens, The World's director of media strategies and her assistant, Jonathan Kealing.

They recruited four partners: the KansasCityKansan.com,<sup>2</sup> covering Kansas City; PVPost.com,<sup>3</sup> covering Prairie



Village; GardnerEdge.com,<sup>4</sup> covering Gardner, Kansas; and EudoraNews.com,<sup>5</sup> which was a World Co. weekly newspaper turned into a website. Plans were to use a portion of the Net-J funds to create a fifth partner to

cover Manhattan, Kansas. Added later was EudoraReporter.com,<sup>6</sup> which covered an area that The World Co. had pulled back from; the Eudora News went inactive in January 2012.

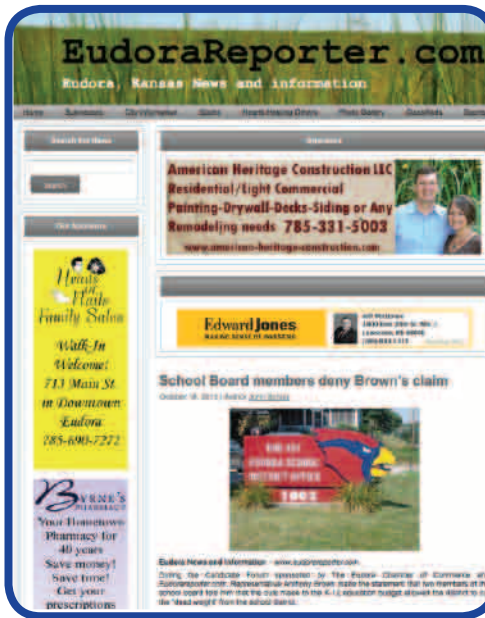
From the start, the partners wanted to create revenue opportunities. The World Co. wanted to “look at what it would take to layer in a regional ad network across the top of a content- and audience-sharing network,” Kealing said.

One idea was to expand The World Co.’s successful gift certificate program to restaurants in partner communities. In this program, restaurants gave the news organization gift certificates as payments for advertising. The company then resold those certificates at a discount to members of the community. This allowed businesses to pay for ads in trade and the news organization to turn that trade into cash.

By June 2011, participation from a couple of the partners had fallen off.

On Sept. 20, both Stevens and Kealing left the company. Kealing joined Public Radio International in Minneapolis. Stevens planned to start a network of health-related websites in northern California.

John Taylor, who was in charge of the company’s community news sites, inherited the project. In October, he reported that “a big hurdle continues to be the hyperlocal nature of the sites involved,” which limited opportunities for co-publishing the content.



The idea of an advertising network persisted. Taylor said the partners were studying such issues as:

- Would it need a dedicated sales representative?
- What kinds of advertisers would be targeted?
- How would the revenue split work (based on page views, who made the sale or click-throughs to the advertiser?)
- How would billing and collections be handled?

By January 2012, Taylor left to join the Las Vegas Sun. Soon after,

The World Co. returned the funds targeted for creating the Manhattan site. “We began to look around and couldn’t really find a partner in Manhattan. Then we decided it was too big a stretch to launch something,” said Ralph Gage, the company’s director of special projects. “I think we just found ourselves overextended.”

StoryMarket.com died after a little more than a year. “We couldn’t get traction on that,” Anderson said. He said the company got a lot of interest from freelancers who wanted to be paid, but participating partners were not posting content to share.

“We put a lot of energy into StoryMarket,” said Anderson, who is responsible for the company’s weeklies, the daily newspaper, and its three websites. “But it was just one more thing [editors] had to do.”

“I don’t have the time to keep that thing going,” he said. “It was a good idea.” ■

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.storymarket.com>  
<sup>2</sup> <http://www.kansascitykansan.com>  
<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pvpost.com>  
<sup>4</sup> <http://www.gardnerEDGE.com>  
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.eudoranews.com>  
<sup>6</sup> <http://www.eudorareporter.com>





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